

Article in the Toronto Star, December 13, 2004

Resist rush to judgment

American administration has axe to grind with U.N.'s Kofi Annan, *says Paul Heinbecker*

What is a person to believe? And who is a person to believe? According to the uber-hawks in Washington, including their birds of a feather in Congress, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan should not only resign, he should be arrested. And this at the outset, not the conclusion, of an investigation of the Oil-for-Food Program (OFFP) — frontier justice, in the grand old West tradition.

At the same time, the apparent scale of the kickbacks and other fraudulent activities is disturbing.

What should we think?

To understand this issue, the facts and politics have to be disentangled. The Oil for Food Program was launched by the U.N. Security Council, including the United States, in 1996 to relieve the very serious side-effects of the sanctions regime imposed on Iraq following the first Gulf War.

The purpose of those sanctions was to prevent Iraq from becoming a threat, again.

As certified by the Duelfer Report, commissioned by the U.S. administration itself, the sanctions regime, reinforced by weapons inspections, worked. Duelfer found that Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein had been unable to conceal and stockpile existing weapons of mass destruction or to acquire or build new weapons.

The sanctions were effective, but at a great cost to ordinary Iraqi civilians. Child mortality increased dramatically, caloric consumption plummeted, and deadly communicable diseases, such as malaria and measles spread.

To ease the suffering of ordinary Iraqis, the OFFP permitted the sale of Iraqi oil but required that the proceeds be paid into a U.N. escrow account. Those monies were then used to pay for foodstuffs, medicines, and infrastructure materials, including eventually sewage systems, for Iraq. Kuwait was also compensated for losses suffered in the war.

The OFFP worked. Caloric intake rose dramatically, malnutrition of Iraqi children decreased by 50 per cent and disease drastically eased, despite Saddam's spoiler efforts and his marketing of Iraqi suffering to try to end the sanctions against him.

To administer the program, the Security Council established the "661 committee" (after resolution 661) to vet the contracts between Iraq and suppliers to ensure that no proscribed goods were bought, including "dual use" items that had both peaceful and military applications.

The 661 committee vetted every single contract the details of which were known to its members, including the United States, during both the Clinton and second Bush administrations.

The committee could, and did, put "holds" on contracts and no country insisted on more holds than the U.S. did. The point is that while the U.N. secretariat administered the OFFP, Washington was hardly ignorant about it.

In fact, secretariat warnings to the Security Council of oil smuggling and of suspected kickbacks were not acted on.

It had been a Security Council decision, again including the U.S., to allow the Iraqi authorities to determine, within the limits of the program, from whom they would acquire their goods. This decision recognized both that Iraq was a sovereign country and that the U.N. would have to replicate the Iraqi bureaucracy if it were alone to service 26 million Iraqis.

It was, nevertheless, this decision that made it possible for Saddam to demand kickbacks from the suppliers.

The smuggling of oil outside of Iraq by the Iraqi regime was, by definition, not part of the OFFP. Nor was the responsibility for preventing it given to the U.N. secretariat.

As far back as 1991, a multinational interception force, not administered by the U.N., was established to combat smuggling, especially via the Gulf. The smuggling was not much of a secret. The fact that oil was smuggled to Turkey and Jordan was widely known. The oil was not exported by donkey over mountain passes but moved in highly visible tanker trucks, even by pipeline.

The Security Council turned a largely blind eye because the two countries had suffered enormous economic losses in the first Gulf War and continued to suffer significant losses from the crippling of the Iraqi economy, a major customer for both.

Smuggling helped to offset those losses. It was not ideal but it was hardly a secret. To investigate corruption and mismanagement allegations, the secretary-general appointed an independent commission headed by Paul Volcker, the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank.

It is hard to imagine who the U.N. might have hired with greater personal integrity. Volcker is supported by, among others, Reid Morden, the distinguished and savvy former head of Canada's CSIS and deputy minister of foreign affairs. If the U.N. secretariat was trying to avoid scrutiny, it would not appoint these people to investigate.

Two subsequent accusations have been made; first, that Annan's son profited from the OFFP and, second, that the U.N. is not co-operating with the U.S. Congress. On the former, the Volcker Commission will report in due course. On the latter, the U.N., like the Canadian government, is not subject to U.S. sovereignty and jurisdiction and, also like Canada, does not permit its officials to testify before congressional committees. Principle and law aside, in the current climate does it seem likely that Congress would give the U.N. staff a fair hearing?

Belatedly, the U.S. administration has distanced itself from the hawks in Congress. Ambassador John Danforth has said no one is raising questions about the personal integrity of Annan himself.

Given all this, why all the rancor towards the U.N. and its secretary-general and why now?

Two reasons suggest themselves.

First, the alleged Iraqi kickback scheme may have involved U.N. officials and warrants investigation. Second, and more troubling, congressional and other opponents of the U.N., friends of Halliburton to boot, evidently see an opportunity to diminish or destroy an organization they consider an obstacle to U.S. foreign policy.

There is not much doubt that the refusal of the Security Council to endorse the war in Iraq and Annan's characterization of that war as illegal are stimulating the animus of the American right.

A thorough investigation, with interim reports as appropriate, will illuminate the real issues. A rush to judgment, however, would only serve the purpose of destroying the U.N.

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